Lincoln-Douglas Debate in Alton

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When Abraham Lincoln was running for President of the United States, the debates with

Stephen A. Douglas two years earlier in the race for Senate helped him win enough votes

to become President. "Public feeling on the slavery issue had become so flammable that

Lincoln's seven debates with Douglas were carried in newspapers across the land,

proving the prairie lawyer from Springfield more than a match for the most likely

Democratic nominee." This is the conclusion of historian Doris Goodwin.

In 1858, Lincoln and Douglas both wanted to be the United States Senator from

Illinois. Douglas had a better chance of winning. "Lincoln, the challenger, asked

Douglas to campaign with him so they could debate the issues," explained Goodwin.

Douglas thought he was better than Lincoln and did not want to waste his time.

However, he eventually agreed to debate Lincoln.

One of the most important debates was the first Lincoln-Douglas Debate, in

Ottawa on August 21, 1858. As Goodwin described the scene, "Ottawa could claim a

permanent population of at most 7,000. But by debate day, between 10,000 and 20,000

more—estimates vary widely—arrived in town from all directions to fill Ottawa to

overflowing."

One of the main debate topics was the slave laws. The slave laws dictated that

slaves could not vote, be on a jury or hold a political job. During the Ottawa debate of

1858 Lincoln stated, "I will say here. . . that I have no purpose directly or indirectly to

interfere with this institution of slavery and the States were it exists. . . there is no reason

in the world why the negro is not entitled to all the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence, the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

During this debate, Douglas vigorously attacked Lincoln. How to reply, bewildered Lincoln. At his best when he had time carefully to think through his ideas and revise his phrasing, he was clearly uncomfortable in debate format, which required extemporaneous speaking and swift rearrangement of arguments to meet the opponent's charges," in the words of historian David Donald. The debate overall went towards Douglas' side. After the debate Lincoln's friends all believed that Lincoln was far too defensive at Ottawa and told him that he needed to be more aggressive at the next debate but Lincoln shrugged off all the criticism.

There were several later debates. Both men covered over 4,000 miles within Illinois in the course of the campaign, delivering hundreds of speeches. Goodwin reported that "The young Republican leader, Robert Schurz said that it was indeed the whole American people that listened to the debates." Lincoln said in Quincy that the debates "were a successive act of a drama. . . to be enacted not merely in the face of audiences like this, but in the face of the nation."

Eventually, people from all around admired Lincoln's ability to give speeches after hearing him speak or reading his speeches in the newspaper. The *New York Tribune* later said, "No man ever before made such an impression on his first appeal to a New York audience." Even though Lincoln's first debate with Douglas in Ottawa was not perfect, Lincoln improved his style and skills to eventually, years later, win the election for President.

Unfortunately, Lincoln was not elected to the Senate. After his defeat, Lincoln wrote to his friend, "I am glad I made the late race. It gave me a hearing on the great and durable question of the age. . . and though I now sink out of view, and shall be forgotten, I believe I have made some marks which will tell for the cause of civil liberty long after I am gone." Little did Lincoln know that his unsuccessful debate in Ottawa, Illinois, on April 21, 1858, would have such an effect on the future of the United States of America. [From David Donald, *Lincoln*; Don Fehrenbacher, *Lincoln Speeches and Writings 1832-1858*; Doris Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*; and Harold Holzer, *The Lincoln Douglas Debates*.]